

# Sister helps family cope with tragedy

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

GATES — Michael Green, 10, watched Sister Marciana Koesterer, SSJ, cuddling his 2-year-old brother, M.C. Jr., after she had finished "cupping" him — pressing his chest with a plastic cup to loosen the phlegm in his lungs.

"Sister giving you a hugger-bugger?" Michael inquired of his little brother, as Sister Koesterer explained the non-medical reasons for holding the young boy before preparing his intravenous feeding tube.

"A lot of times, (when) children are in the hospital, people just come in and do things to them," remarked Sister Koesterer, a licensed practical nurse who works in the Green home. "He needs to be cuddled," she said of M.C., who suffers from Werdnig-Hoffmann Infantile Supinal Muscular Atrophy, which is gradually degenerating his motor cells, impairing his ability to breathe and move about on his own.

"When someone is ill, a lot of people shy from holding your hands," she added. "For him, it seems real important ... It settles him. It's important for a child to know that sense of touch."

Touching the lives of her home-bound patients is the essence of the vocation Sister Koesterer lives out through her nursing work with the Medical Personnel Pool, and Tender Loving Care Agency, Inc. Yet, as she readily pointed out, she didn't aspire to her current occupation upon joining the Sisters of St. Joseph 30 years ago.

"Well, back when I entered, you really did what you were asked to do," she recalled, commenting that her first assignment was as an assistant cook and baker in the kitchen at the order's motherhouse on East Avenue in Rochester. "I think when we entered, you believed you were going to be a teacher," she continued, pointing out that she contemplated that destiny because the vast majority of her colleagues at the time were working in Catholic schools.

After a few years in the kitchen, however, the Sisters of St. Joseph offered Sister Koesterer the option of becoming a nurse. She took up the offer, and began working as a nurse's aide at St. Ann's Home in Rochester. After obtaining her nursing degree in 1970, she returned to St.



Sister Marciana Koesterer, SSJ, cuddles 2-year-old M.C. Green Jr. as his brother, Michael, 10, gives him a kiss. Sister Koesterer, a licensed practical nurse, provides care for M.C. Jr. three days a week. Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Ann's and later worked at various institutions throughout the diocese, taking up her latest role as a home nurse in 1983.

Sister Koesterer explained that she went into home nursing to free up time to care for her mother, an area resident who suffers from circulatory problems. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 7 a.m.-5 p.m., Sister Koesterer works at the Green home. She spends much of the remaining week tending to her mother, and filling in for other home-care workers on weekends when needed.

In the past few years, the agencies with which Sister Koesterer works have steered her toward patients like M.C. who have rare diseases. Parents particularly like the fact that they can relax a little when they leave their offspring in her charge, she said, noting that such trust is a boon to families faced with around-the-clock responsibility for a sick child.

"It's very devastating and hard on families," she said of diseases like muscular atrophy that strike young children. "It can really strain a family, because the family has to rotate around the child's needs. Their whole life changes because of an illness like that."

"In my experience," she observed, "people feel comfortable enough to leave me with their children and go out ... I think

it's great that they are comfortable enough to go and get out."

She speculated that her easygoing, joking manner is part of what puts her clients at ease. "I think it's important not to be grim all the time," she asserted. "You have to laugh at yourself. I think it breaks the tension for the families. We joke about silly funny things."

Indeed, one might be struck by the serene manner in which she approaches working with a child whose life is so constrained by illness.

"I think you have to look at life in a positive way and look at positive things," she commented, spelling out the basis for her upbeat approach to going out on the job.

M.C.'s battle with muscular atrophy has created one of the bright spots of her experience in home nursing, she observed. Although the Greens previously lost two infants to the disease, M.C. — aided by a newly developed ventilator that helps him breathe — has lived longer with the disease than any other child in the area, Sister Koesterer said. Until this ventilator was developed a few years ago, Werdnig-Hoffmann infants didn't live long after

their illnesses were diagnosed, she noted.

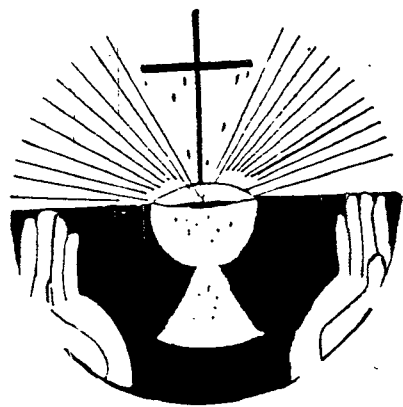
M.C., who can speak a few words, is now learning how to concentrate on objects with the help of an occupational therapist. "He's very aware and has high intelligence," Sister Koesterer observed of M.C., a fan of television cartoons that play in his room 24 hours a day at his mother's insistence. "He wakes up in the middle of the night — he'll look to see if the TV's on," Sister Koesterer says. "It's a security blanket."

As secure as patients feel in Sister Koesterer's care, so does she feel in the profession chosen for her. "I think it was the Lord's doing," she said of the option to study nursing. "I just know that this is where I should be."

Having entered the lives of so many patients over the years, Sister Koesterer said she has been paid back many times over for attending to her clients' needs.

"I truly am blessed by these children," she mused. "They've given me a great deal in life by who they are and what they are. I've said that I feel at times I'm having a deep experience with them, a soul kind of experience with them."

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